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1961/05/01

MEMORANDUM

May 1, 1961

TO : The Honorable
John F. Kennedy
President of the United States of America

FROM : Senator Mike Mansfield

SUBJECT: The Laotian Situation.

A. Short of actual armed intervention, the following courses of action are still open:

1. Address a Presidential communication to the other 13 nations scheduled to participate in the Conference on Laos. Request that all 14 nations urge publicly--individually or collectively--that all factions in Laos cease-fire and stand fast in present positions.
2. Address a note to India, as chairman of the cease-fire commission to the effect that the commission call immediately for the temporary sealing of the Laotian borders to land, sea or air passage pending the convening of the 14 nation conference--this sealing to be subject to verification by the cease-fire commission.
3. Request that India, as chairman, speed up the dispatch of the cease-fire group to Laos.
4. The U.N. should be held in abeyance on this question until it is clear that the present approach is not going to work. Nehru might be felt out in confidence on this question. If he is persuaded that the present approach is doomed, then India, as chairman of the cease-fire group, might be pressed to raise the question in the U.N.

Another alternative would be to hint to Britain and the Soviet Union as co-chairman of the 14-nation group that if the present approach for which they are responsible cannot work, they have a joint responsibility to bring the matter to the U.N.

B. The whole point of the above suggestions is to get us out of the center of this thing and into a position more commensurate with our limited interests, our practical capabilities, and our political realities at home. If these suggestions added to what has already transpired do not work, we are confronted then and only then with the question to intervene or not to intervene. These are some factors which we should bear in mind at that point:

1. If there were a reasonable expectation that an intervention in Laos would be of the type which took place in Lebanon, it might not be so bad. But is that the probability? The circumstances are greatly different. In Lebanon, in effect, we had a situation where naval power could be highly effective. We were dealing essentially with Egypt, a weak country. The Lebanese will to independence was not entirely absent and the armed Lebanese dissidents were relatively small in number. Communist power could not be brought to bear on the situation, as necessary, in a hierarchical pattern. It was either Soviet Russian intervention or nothing and the Russians chose not to intervene. In Laos, however, those in armed opposition--from Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le leftward--appear to have much the greater strength and popular appeal. Moreover, the Communists are in a position to control the feed-in of support from outside for these forces. They can draw, first, on Hanoi. If that is not enough, Peking can channel in such measures as are necessary to hold us in check as we add to our commitment. All this and the Russians can still stand aside from actual physical involvement and plead for peace.

If the military struggle expands in Laos and our military involvement in it deepens, without actual Soviet Russian intervention, the Russians will be in a position to call all the shots. They can reassert heavy dominance over Peking. The Chinese pressures will be off them in Sinkiang and Outer Mongolia. They can still pose as the peaceful one before the world while they condemn us for the bloodshed in Laos.

We may start an intervention with only Pakistani, Thais and Filipino forces on the ground and, perhaps, ourselves in the air and on the sea. But can we end it that way? Even if we do the net result will be a deeper involvement on our part at a still greater cost in aid of all kinds in Laos for years to come just to hold the situation from deteriorating again.

We had better also face now the possibility that a highly limited involvement on our part may not work in Laos as it did in Lebanon. That means that we had better be prepared abroad to face the following ramifications:

- a. That we may have to intervene ourselves on the ground in Laos.
- b. That we may have to act to meet stepped up covert attacks in South Viet Nam and, perhaps, open invasion from the north.

- c. That we may have to cope with a renewal of bombardments of the off-shore islands and an invasion of those islands, if not of Formosa itself.
- d. That we may have to face, at least, border difficulties in Korea and perhaps serious uprisings in the south if not an actual re-invasion.
- e. That we may have to deal with a resumption of, at least, serious trouble-making in Berlin, short of causa belli with the Soviet Union.

If we intervene, we can ^{fairly} anticipate an initial reaction of public approval for your "standing firm." If the intervention succeeds in the Lebanese pattern, there will be some sustained approval but it is not likely to drown out the complaints about the increased costs of aid which will follow. If the intervention involves U.S. forces, the initial approval, ^{such} as it is, will start to disappear as soon as the first significant casualty lists are published. And it will not be long before the approval of "stand-firm" gives way to the disapproval of "Kennedy's war" and "what are we doing in Laos?"

2. If we do not intervene:

As of this moment, it appears that Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le will probably emerge as the leaders of the next government of Laos. Souvanna Phouma is a nationalist. Such information as is available suggests that Kong Le is also a nationalist. Our officials have been, in my opinion, too glib in judging Souvanna Phouma to be gullible with respect to the communists. He is an extremely astute man, skilled in eastern court politics and not without considerable knowledge of the West. During the last Administration, he was alienated from the U.S. largely by poor policies, excessive aid and pressure to conform to our concepts of how to handle his internal politics and foreign relations. It was a serious error, in my opinion, not to have made an exceptional effort to get him to go through with his proposed recent visit to this country.

If Souvanna Phouma emerges on top, he will now be heavily dependent on Russia but not necessarily China which has made its influence felt via Hanoi on his half-brother who heads the Pathet Lao. He may find the Russians more difficult to deal with than he anticipates and the Russians may find Laos more expensive to control than they anticipate. There may be a silver cloud in this, for Laos could become a bone of contention between Russia and China because of what appears to be their backing of different elements in Laos.

In any event, if Souvanna Phouma does emerge our response to him should be diplomatically correct. We should discontinue military aid in all forms. We should discontinue defense support. We should be open to but not eager for aid-requests for food and for specific projects of economic development or for Point 4 type projects. All is not necessarily lost if Souvanna Phouma comes to power. We will at least be in a position to cut our losses with some measure of dignity and we will be relieved of an enormous over-commitment.

As for the rest of Southeast Asia, it does not automatically follow, that Souvanna Phouma will provide a wide-open gate into Thailand and South Viet Nam. Given the nature of the terrain and communications in that region, the gate has already been just about as wide-open as it can be for infiltration. If our own diplomacy is astute enough to give Souvanna Phouma some room for manoeuvre, he is not likely just to carry out Communist orders and lay out the carpet for their armed forces to pass over into Thailand and Viet Nam even if that is the next move on their list.

If Souvanna Phouma, leaning heavily on the Communists, comes to power in Laos, there will be some adverse reaction at home but it will be mild compared with the reaction to Boun Oum kept in power with American blood and treasure. Souvanna Phouma will also cause some consternation in government circles in Bangkok and Saigon, because of his heavy dependency on the communists. This consternation is likely to lead to some groping on the part of the undependable Thais for better contacts with the Russians, the Japanese, and perhaps, with the Chinese.

In Viet Nam, the consequences of the developments in Laos may also be felt in an increasing uncertainty among the peasants and, hence, a greater acquiescence on their part in underground activities of the Viet Minh.

If it makes these two countries feel any securer, perhaps we might see to it that an aircraft carrier is present from time to time on goodwill visits in the harbors at Bangkok and Saigon. This should not be done, however, except at the express request of the principal civilian authority in each country and they ought not to be pressured into making the request. In my opinion, to station a regular contingent of our ground forces in Viet Nam and Thailand at this time would probably cost more in adverse propaganda among the peoples of these countries than it would be worth in terms of reassuring the governments.

If we cut out military aid to Laos, some of these funds might be diverted to Diem in order to stiffen resistance to meet an anticipated increase in sabotage and terror. The problem here is to adjust the flow of military aid at a level which is high enough to act against Viet Minh sabotage but not so high that it atrophies the will of the Viet Nameese government to do what it must do to strengthen its ties among the Vietnamese people. It will take great astuteness to make this adjustment and we ought to assign to Viet Nam an exceptional diplomatic mission and ~~an~~ aid team in a dedicated effort to foster rapid economic development of the country and the improvement of its political institutions. Viet Nam, in my opinion, has the greatest potential in leadership, human capacities and resources for a stable freedom in the region.

As for Malaya and Indonesia, I see no point in becoming more deeply involved in either through the extension of military aid. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to see the purpose or justification for much more than Point 4 projects for these countries, coupled with highly selective development loans.

The whole substance of these suggestions for Southeast Asia is in line with those offered on Laos. We are, in my opinion, too far out on too many costly and shaky limbs in that region and our basic problem is how to get down from them so that our commitments will be reasonably commensurate with our interests--to get down from them in a dignified and responsible fashion before communist intrigue compels us either to descend in embarrassment and disorder or to climb still further out.

As I see it, the only way to do this is:

- (1) To concentrate our principal efforts in a place like Viet Nam where there is some hope for the future;
- (2) To eschew the costly search for cold-war "allies," most of whom can be "allies" only in a heavily dependent sense, and to concentrate, instead, on developing honestly mutual and friendly relations with countries like Cambodia, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and Thailand;
- (3) To encourage a much more active role for India in Southeast Asian affairs, as well as for other non-communist countries while at the same time limiting our own.

To be sure, there are risks in this course of limiting and reducing our commitments. Something which passes for communism or "communist-oriented" may emerge in any of these countries. But the fact is that the realities of these countries will not readily change and it is not likely to be any easier for Moscow or Peking to play a dominant role in them than it is for us. In any event, if there are risks in this course, what of the risks in the other, the course of involvement? What are we to say of these latter risks after the experience in Laos, where the sky was the limit as far as commitment on our part was concerned and yet, we still wind up with the alternative of a "communist-oriented" government taking over or the military involvement of this nation?